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The President's Men: Mis-Shapen Identities

As the Nixon administration scandals have unfolded, the adjectives applied to their principals have changed dramatically. The formerly "agressive" John Ehrlichman has become "bulldoggish." The once "assured" John Mitchell is now described as "sullen." Last year's "political genius" Charles Colson has emerged a "subdued defendant." The used-to-be "charming, smiling" Dwight Chapin is now merely "composed." To some extent, of course, the changes in adjectives may represent changes in personality. But, perhaps even more, they represent changes in perception. For at least as much as Ehrlichman and Mitchell and Chapin have changed, many people need to think of them as changed, to think of them as different, different from "normal" people, so as to escape the dreaded recognition of what within them may lurk within many of us.

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The penal system will not reform the Watergate criminals; nor will it protect us from people who are dangerous. What it will do is assure that these people are different; it will make them different so we can rest confident that what happened to Magruder and Colson and Krogh could never happen to us. But if we are to learn anything from Watergate, we would do well to examine these people before they are imprisoned, before they are made different, so that we can understand that what happened to Magruder, Colson, and Krogh might happen to many of us and probably would to some if we were given the same chance.

Ehrlichman and Chapin, Dean and Magruder, far from representing what most of us think of as bad about America, embody exactly what we think of as good: clean-cut, white, Protestant, middle-class young men who, with, in the Horatio Alger phrase, "pluck and a little luck," made it to the top. Neither brilliant nor stupid, neither imaginative nor dull, neither outstanding nor outcast, they moved from Boy Scout awards banquets to the high school football team to the college fraternity to the corporate office with the smoothness and dexterity many of us hope to find in our own offspring. Julie Nixon Eisenhower now says her father did not do well in picking his immediate aides, but she does him an injustice: he got, and many of the rest of us got, exactly what we wanted.

Then how did it go wrong? It went wrong because as they went through their passage, the Watergate crew stayed too shortly at each port to take anything from it. Like many of the rest of us, they were too busy thinking about the next port, the next opportunity, the next hustle to even consider what they might learn from where they were. Compared to most White House staffs, Mr. Nixon's may be relatively undistinguished, but it does stand out in one respect: its members are among the nation's most peripatetic wanderers. Magruder, for example, travelled from birth in New York, to college in Massachusetts, to graduate school in Chicago, to a business career in Kansas and California before joining the President's staff in his early '30s. He made it as far as the White House precisely because the one special quality he did have was a willingness at each stage to leave behind his past, to abandon his home and friends, and reach for the next brass ring.

But there is, always, a price. John Ehrlichman's Eagle Scout badge, Charles Colson's unalloyed ambition, Jeb Magruder's bustling all-Americanism and Dwight Chapin's well-mannered graciousness failed when the choices got tough. Those who were so able, and so anxious, to utilize their capacity to appear as many of us wanted them to be became in the process something we did not want, or at least something we do not admit to wanting.

As they changed identities with the ease an actor changes costumes, they lost sight of whatever real identity they did once have. Principles became as expendable as last year's pin-striped suit, tools to be employed, and cast off, in the continuing super-sell.

When Elliot Richardson, a few years out of law school, was considering a job with Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Archibald Cox is reputed to have told him that he should establish himself at home first: "When I was in Washington," Cox said, "I always thought it was important to be from some place." Cox's nemesis Richard Nixon preaches a different sermon; Mr. Nixon proudly tells us he lay awake at nights as a boy listening to the trains and dreaming of how he would escape being from where he was. Many of us like to think of ourselves as Cox: cool and contained; dress, manner, and speech reflecting an inner assuredness of station and purpose. Most of us know that we are more like Mr. Nixon; awkward and nervous; dress, manner, and speech reflecting an absence of identity and a too supple readiness to create one for whatever the occasion requires.

It is not ironical that the administration which sold patriotism and law-and-order and "family life" with the same gusto many of its members previously peddled Black Flag insect repellant should turn out to be the most lawless government in our nation's history. It was inevitable. Men who know their beliefs and feel their convictions do not need to parade them. It is only men like Nixon's men, men like many of us, who do not know ourselves, who treat principles as if they must be "put across" or "packaged." Mr. Nixon has rejected his mother's quiet Quaker meetings and adopted the football stadium religious revivals of Billy Graham because only among thousands can he hide from himself and from us the embarrassment he feels at the prospect of real spiritual expression. Like many of us, Mr. Nixon has no heritage, religious or otherwise; like many of us, he is too vain, too insecure, and too ambitious to admit it.

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And so he creates a heritage, transforming a family wedding into a gauche, comic opera affair of state, turning the American flag into a private badge, declaring the boorish entrepreneurialism of Abplanalp, Rebozo, and Stone to be American nobility. But it does not work for him, as it does not work on a lesser scale for the rest of us. A Cox, on the one hand, or a George Wallace, on the other, has a home; that is why we are so fascinated and so awed by them whatever our political and social views. Many of the rest of us do not, and we live lies to avoid facing it. As did Chapin and Dean and Magruder, we might even be willing to commit crimes to protect those lies, to save our own faces. Certainly little beyond fear of losing respectability holds us back.

During the 1972 campaign, Mr. Nixon and his advisers made the conscious decision that he could not withstand public scrutiny on his own merits and must, therefore, campaign as "The President." Now we know to what lengths men were willing to go to maintain that first of many cover-ups. We have learned what happens when you forget what you are and force yourself to be something you are not. There is a lesson here. Many of the Watergate criminals are speaking out about Mr. Nixon in ways they would have never dared in their White House days. Jeb Magruder went to jail saying he felt more liberated than he has since his college days. The tragedy of Watergate is that it should take the threat of jail for Magruder, Dean, Colson, and so many others to be free.